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ASANTE QUEEN MOTHERS: PRECOLONIAL AUTHORITY IN A POSTCOLONIAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

While the Asantehene and the Asantehemmaa are well known figures in Ghana, less familiar are the many queen mothers who function in parallel roles to chiefs in every Asante town and paramountcy. Ignored by the British and generally bypassed by modern Ghanaian leaders, queen mothers have nevertheless continued to serve their constituencies faithfully. More recently, however, globalization has discovered them, and external sources are beginning to seek them out for local projects. Yet, queen mothers continue to face serious obstacles as a precolonial female authority in a postcolonial society.

Résumé

Bien que le Roi et la Reine des Asante soient très connus au Ghana, la plupart des Reines-mères qui jouent parallèlement les rôles de chefs dans tous les milieux Asante sont moins reconnues. En dépit du fait qu'elles sont ignorées par les Britanniques et non reconnues en général par les leaders ghanéens actuels, les Reines-mères continuent de servir loyalement leurs chefferies. Cependant, le concept de la mondialisation a très récemment permis de les redécouvrir. C'est ainsi que des organisations étrangères commencent à les repérer pour des projets locaux. Après tout, les Reines-mères font toujours face à de sérieux problèmes par le fait qu'elles constituent un pouvoir féminin précolonial dans une société postcoloniale.

Introduction

No longer absent from representations of the Asante people, queen mothers are being discovered by the global media as well as scholars. Of particular interest is an August 2000 article in GEO magazine of Germany. GEO sent journalist Carmen Butta and photographer Sibylle Bergemann to Ghana for the express purpose of documenting Asante Queen Mothers, and their extensive article in a special issue devoted to the subject of women and men, old myths and new roles, claims a significant space for queen mothers on the contemporary global stage.

This article will consider the Queen Mother's role and responsibilities in the political system of the Asante as it is articulated by individuals who hold these positions, recognizing that they fulfill very specific functions while at the same time they bring to life images that express key concepts in the culture.¹ The term *ohemmaa* (sing., *ahemmaa* pl.) in Twi refers to the female leaders who parallel the male chiefs (*ohene* sing., *ahene* pl.), in the indigenous political system known as chieftaincy. The term for chief or queen mother combines with the name of a specific location (or "stool" as it is known) to create the full title. The king of the Asante is then the *Asantehene*, and the queen mother of the Asante is the *Asantehemmaa*. The same linguistic rule applies throughout the Akan cultures, so the queen mother of the paramountcy and the town of Offinso is the *Ofensohemmaa*, and the chief of Offinso is the *Ofensohene*.

Although colonial forces aggressively ignored queen mothers and other female leaders in Africa, and the forces of modernization generally have failed to acknowledge them, queen mothers are certainly conscious of their own significance as female leaders.² The GEO article features the Queen Mother of

¹ This work derives from the author's ethnographic research on Asante Queen Mothers carried out in the Ashanti region in 1989-90 on a Fulbright Research Fellowship and subsequently.

² R.S. Rattray, anthropologist and British colonial administrator for the Ashanti, wrote in 1923,

all of the Asante, the *Asantehemmaa*, and the paramount queen mother of Offinso, the *Ofensohemmaa*, an educated woman who was an elementary school teacher before she became queen mother. The *Asantehemmaa*, Afua Kobi Serwaa Ampem II, who has been on the stool since 1977, has many accomplishments to her credit, but perhaps she might consider her most impressive one to be her son, the Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II. When the king's stool became vacant in 1999 because "a great tree had fallen,"³ the *Asantehemmaa* nominated her son, the youngest of her five children, to be placed on the stool. Being the son of the Asante Queen Mother defined him as an ideal candidate according to his lineage, but in addition he possessed qualifications that ranked him high by the standards of the modern world. A resident of London as well as Kumasi at the time of his nomination, he is well educated and has achieved success in the business world. After lengthy discussions by the council, kingmakers, the royal family, government officials, and indeed a large portion of the Ghanaian population, he was selected from several qualified candidates to become the new king. Subsequently, elaborate enstoolment ceremonies, attended by thousands of the Asante people in the Kumasi stadium, confirmed the new Asantehene as Osei Tutu II. Immediately he established himself as an effective king with a vision and the ability to implement it. Among his most notable achievements, launched soon after his enstoolment, the Asante Educational Fund seeks to improve education in the Ashanti region generally and to aid students in their efforts to advance their education.

The Offinsohemmaa, Ama Serwah Nyarko, the queen mother of the paramountcy of Offinso, came on the stool in 1987. She has traveled to Germany in recent years where she spoke to women's organizations interested in development in Africa; she then hosted these women when they came to visit Ghana, but she has also been to Amsterdam to visit her constituency there. Not the only traveling queen mother, others too visit their constituencies in New York, Chicago, Toronto, London, and Amsterdam. Because they are trained in leadership and the exercise of authority, they are eager to step onto the global stage, whether educated or not, because they know that increased knowledge of the world, especially through travel, further legitimizes their authority.

Not restricted to those who live in their village or town and fulfill their responsibilities on a daily basis, the title and signification of this role has been expanded to apply to female leaders in the markets who settle disputes among the sellers (Clark 1994), and in more recent years a variation with a special title has been created that allows a town to honour (and claim) one of its own daughters who has achieved high status outside of the town or village. In this latter instance, the home town of a woman who has achieved success in government or through business in the urban areas, endows her with the title of honorary Queen Mother, acknowledging her success and linking her to the home town in the hopes that she will assist them in efforts to move forward.

To consider the role of queen mothers in contemporary Ghana we benefit from the discourse developed by Africanist scholars and the educated elite in the last decade of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century, a critical perspective that looks to both the past and the future. Consistent with this perspective we raise the question, what is the significance of this pre-colonial

To-day the Queen Mothers are unrecognized by us...In other words, the Ashanti have simply accepted the fact that our system seemed to take no official cognizance of women as a power in the family and in the State, and therefore did not question our methods. Now I feel certain we have here a tremendous potential power for good in these old mothers of Africa;... Surely if we that is, the Government, do not in some small measure give the respect and honour that has always been the Queen Mothers' right and the Queen Mother is to an Ashanti the personification of motherhood we cannot be surprised if her children follow our example (Rattray 1923: 84-85).

Concerning chieftaincy in post-independence states, Effa Okupa writes, "The role of the Queen mother and Kingmakers had fallen into disrepute during the colonial rule, but was activated post-independence." (Okupa 1998: 28).

³The phrase, "a great tree has fallen," is a euphemistic metaphor (an example of indirection), used to refer to the passing away of a specific Asantehene, in this case Opoku Ware II., and it also indicates that the Asante people are in mourning.

institution in a post-colonial society? Like a Member of Parliament who asked me if, in my opinion, chieftaincy served any good purpose in contemporary Ghanaian life, there are Ghanaians who question whether the institution of chieftaincy is useful in contemporary Ghana. Yet, there are many others, both educated and uneducated, who place a high value on it. More generally, throughout Africa debates over gender, authority, and social change are frequently shaped into an opposition between *custom* and *modernity* or a conflict that sets *culture* against *human rights*. Achille Mbembe has recently introduced new terms to replace these dichotomies and transcend their limitations (Mbembe 2001). He argues that *cosmopolitanism* and *nativism* transcend the limitations of the more commonly used terms. But more importantly, he argues that African identities are not captured by these concepts but are composed and stylized and ultimately rearranged around central signifiers which function both as images and illusions. Inviting the analyst to transcend facile oppositions, he urges us to grasp the spring of tension, the lines of escape and the paradoxes inherent in African identities.

Turning to the Asante once again, paradox occurs in such abundance that it seems to constitute the norm. Wearing traditional cloth, Asante women and men gather at the palace of the king (the Asantehene) or the Queen Mother of Asante (the Asantehemmaa) for courts, funerals, durbars and other special occasions. Simultaneously, and within this context, however, they are pursuing the goals of modernity as seriously as any business person in a Western suit. These paradoxes, deeply enmeshed in contemporary Asante, are negotiated through the institution of chieftaincy and the practices of custom as performed. Through the weekly meetings of courts, the frequent large-scale funerals, and regularly occurring rituals, Asante **perform their culture**, as one chief explained to me. In the process of performance, identity is embodied, affirmed, and paradoxes are temporarily resolved. Although they still function as political leaders within Asante culture, the role of queen mothers, and chiefs, defines them as signifiers of the institution of chieftaincy, and they affirm Asante identity in the performance of their role. A plethora of academic studies have demonstrated that identity, like ethnicity, becomes important when significant changes occur in a social/cultural group, especially those involving power and authority, and a consciousness of identity develops, attracting attention to the unique features that define and name the people. At the time when such a consciousness develops, signs and signifiers of identity are identified, intensifying or modifying previously held signs, or creating new ones entirely but linking them to the past. Characteristic of signs, according to Peter Bogatyrev and Roman Jakobson, is the capacity to represent several ideas at once and therefore to fulfill several semiotic functions at the same time. However, one semiotic function may be dominant over others, and functions may shift, so that the dominant function of a sign may change when circumstances change (Bogatyrev 1976: 20-32; Jakobson 1971: 82-87). Moreover, according to Volosinov (1973: 23-24), different social interests may use the same sign for different ideological purposes, leading to refraction, distortion, conflict, or even crisis over meaning and function.

Focusing on Queen Mothers as a sign of Asante female authority, in this article I will explore their role from the perspective of performance, directing attention to actual situations and events and particular individuals. The performance approach focuses on individuals at a specific moment in time who enact their roles in certain defined situations and settings, taking account of the fact that others are aware of performance and will respond to it. This approach attends carefully to context as well, including the relevant historical, social, political, and economic conditions affecting a set of circumstances.

Moreover, a performance approach shifts the focus of analysis from an abstract idea of an institution that operates according to a set of rules to the actual practices of the participants. This approach may represent a challenge to those who prefer to concentrate attention on a set of rules and guidelines, oral or written, as the explanation for what they do. Understandably, many formerly colonial peoples develop standardized responses for anthropologists and other outsiders who wish to carry out "work" in their culture. But these "texts" only represent an abstract system, or a system of some previous era, and though they can be useful for certain purposes, they do not inform us of what is actually taking place in the present set of circumstances. Recognizing that the performance approach attempts to understand specific people in the context of their actions, and that individual humans can function as signs and that those signs have different functions which can undergo change, this article views Queen Mothers as a sign of Asante female authority at a moment in time when paradox and irony are much in

evidence, and their functions are certainly undergoing modification, and, consequently, the meaning of the sign itself is also changing.⁴

The Asante, one of the several societies who constitute the larger cultural group known as the Akan, are located in the Ashanti region of Ghana. This article focuses on Asante queen mothers, but the political system of which they are a part characterizes all of the Akan peoples located in southern Ghana and Ivory Coast. In the Ashanti Region every town, village or division has a queen mother and chief who serve as traditional authorities. Each local chief and queen mother belongs to a division, headed by a paramount chief and queen mother, and all of the divisions together complete the Asante culture. At the top of this hierarchy sit the King and Queen Mother of the Asante, the *Asantehene* and the *Asantehemmaa*. This principle of replication of the political system from the top of the pyramid to the bottom distinguishes the Akan from many other kingdoms in Africa, and it also ensures that every individual has a direct link to a political leader, who has a direct link to a superior. A development of some interest in recent years is the fact that patrilineal ethnic groups who are not related to the matrilineal Akan, and who have not had queen mothers in the past, have begun incorporating them into their systems as well.

This form of leadership has been characterized as a dual gender system by scholars, or one with gender parallelism (Okonjo 1976; Sudarkasa 1987). Central to the dynamics of chieftaincy and to the identity of every individual member of the culture is the kinship system which is matrilineal. That is to say, one's family and one's clan are defined through the mother's line, and if one is to be a queen mother or a chief, one must be descended from a royal ancestress through the mother. Not only are political leadership and kinship defined by the precolonial cultural system, but it integrates other institutions and practices, including religion, gender, law and land use. Recognized locally as "Custom," and sometimes labeled "traditional rule" or "traditional authority,"⁵ queen mothers and chiefs are involved in all domains of custom, while at the same time they are engaged in adapting to postcolonial society

Queen mothers of the Akan have their own stools. Among all of the Akan peoples the stool symbolizes power and authority just as the throne does in European monarchies. Thus when it is said that a queen mother "has her own stool," the reference is that she has her own power. She occupies her stool on the basis of her own qualifications. This distinguishes Akan female leaders from many others in Africa who derive their power from their relationship to a chief. Among the Akan both a queen mother and a chief must be members of the same royal family. Each stool has a royal family associated with one of the seven or eight clans, and the chief and queen mother will belong to that royal family. In some instances the queen mother may, in fact, be the biological mother of the chief (as with the current *Asantehemmaa* and *Asantehene*), but more often they are aunt and nephew or uncle and niece, or, frequently they are cousins; they can also be sister and brother. The current *Dwabenhene* and *Dwabenhemmaa* are sister and brother, and the previous *Dwabenhemmaa* was the biological mother of the chief. When a queen mother's or a chief's stool becomes vacant, a new queen mother or chief is selected by the royal family and/or the chief, and enstooled. They never assume their positions simultaneously and certainly cannot ever be married to each other as they must be members of the same family.⁶

A queen mother's duties reflect her relationship to the chief and, equally as important, her responsibility for the welfare of women in her domain. She is also the embodiment of motherhood and is thus considered to be the mother of her clan in her town and consequently the mother of the chief. She possesses knowledge and wisdom as the mother of the clan and is expected to impart that wisdom to the chief on a regular basis. This knowledge and wisdom legitimates her authority; it includes the genealogy of the royal family and political wisdom as well. She exercises her moral

⁴ For a more thorough discussion of the performance approach as applied to Asante Queen Mothers, see Stoeltje: 1995; 1997a; 1997b).

⁵ For a complete description of the system as well as the system used by the people of Northern Ghana, see Kwame Arhin's (1995) brief but thorough work entitled *Traditional Rule in Ghana: Past and Present*.

⁶ This information was provided by the *Dwabenhene* who also points out that it is a longstanding tradition in Juaben (*Dwaben*, an important paramountcy) for the queen mother to be the biological mother of the chief.

authority officially as an advisor to the chief on matters of tradition and religion, but also on secular affairs. In addition she is the nominator of the chief. When a chief's stool becomes vacant, she nominates a candidate (on the basis of her knowledge) from among those who are qualified to the elders of the royal family and the kingmakers (elders and sub-chiefs). If that candidate is not acceptable, she can nominate two others, always on the basis of her knowledge and wisdom. When political matters run smoothly, the queen mother advises the chief regularly and sits on his left in his court and advises him as he makes decisions there. But when the political affairs of any stool erupt into conflict, the relationship between the queen mother and the chief will reflect these controversies.⁷

Equally important is the queen mother's responsibility for the welfare of women and domestic affairs in her domain. Covering a broad range of social relations, the heaviest responsibility she bears is for the resolution of conflict. All queen mothers are available for hearing cases involving women, domestic affairs, or issues of everyday life and commerce.

The Asantehemmaa holds a formal court each Tuesday to which many women and some men bring their conflicts, whether they are matters of insult or curse between two women, or a conflict that has occurred between a woman and a man. The Asantehemmaa has six to eight linguists (*akyeame*) (all male but one), who direct the court, and twelve to fifteen male elders who listen and interrogate the litigants, finally coming to consensus in regard to the outcome of the case in the absence of the Queen Mother, who hears and rules on some cases but not all.⁸ Paramount queen mothers also hear cases involving various kinds of domestic problems, not only those between a man and a woman, but those involving extended family members in a household or tenants in a house. These queen mothers, as well as those in the smaller towns (who are known as *ɔbaa panin*), do not have a formal court, but they do have one or more linguists (*akyeame*) through whom litigants speak to the queen mother and who report her questions and directives back to the litigants.⁹ They may also have numerous other elders, relatives, or servants who attend the hearing of cases. No matter how small a queen mother's domain may be (neighborhood in a small city or a small village) or how important she may be, she has the authority to hear cases in her domain and pronounce the outcome, providing guidance and direction for the resolution of conflict in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Attending to these many disputes and determining the outcome, which often involves a fine and some form of ritual behavior, constitutes a major portion of a queen mother's duties.¹⁰

A queen mother has many ritual duties, but one of the most important concerns the recognition of a young woman's maturity. Custom dictates that all young women must be brought to the queen mother to be registered when they first begin to menstruate. She examines each young girl to make certain she is not pregnant and then records her name in her registry. This practice has taken the place of female initiation rites formerly practiced by the Akan which involved the celebration of a girl's womanhood by her friends as well as family (Sarpong 1977).¹¹

Like a chief, a queen mother is expected to celebrate *Akwasedae* and *Awukudae* in her own village or town. These are the major religious rituals in the traditional religion; they honor the ancestors by

⁷ Although there is considerable variation from one stool to another in practice, these principles are generally followed throughout Ashanti and Akyim, as confirmed by interviews and observations at Manhyia, Juaben, Juaso, Offinso, Nsuta, Boankra, and other sites in Ashanti.

⁸ *Akyeame* are important members of a queen mother's or chief's entourage who relay all information to the queen mother or chief from a speaker and then relay their response back to the speaker because it is not permitted for anyone to speak directly to a chief or queen mother.

⁹ See Kwesi Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief*, for a study of the *Okyeame* and his or her speaking role.

¹⁰ I am especially grateful to the Asantehemmaa, Nana Afua Kobi Serwaa Ampem II for permitting me to observe her Court, and to Nana Osei, an *okyeame* at the Court, and to the *Dwanatoahemmaa* (the pleading chief) of the Court, for their assistance, and to the Juabenhene for permitting me to observe his court and discussing its procedures and cases with me.

¹¹ Formerly it was a disgrace if a young woman became pregnant before she had undergone the initiation rites and been publicly recognized as a woman by visiting the queen mother. Though initiation rites are no longer performed, some young women still pay a ritual visit to the queen mother.

making sacrifices to the stools of previous chiefs and queen mothers, a vitally important ritual in a religion that places great emphasis on the ancestors. In addition to these observances that occur every six weeks, queen mothers, like chiefs, participate in the funerals of other royals or family members or prestigious members of their community, large events of public display, especially for those of high rank. Although these are the major public rituals, individual queen mothers are also responsible for more private forms of ritual life as well.

This brief overview of a queen mother's authority and responsibilities illustrates that the queen mother and the chief function in parallel roles based on the principle of complementarity, not on a basis of equal power and authority. Also important, the political system has far more actors in it than these two prominent leaders who also act as signs of authority, female and male. A powerful position in every clan carries the title of *abusuapanin*, an elder who serves as the head of the clan and the royal family and provides the link between the royal family and the chief and Queen Mother. In addition there are sub-chiefs in every town who are the chiefs of the clans other than that of the royal family, and these sub-chiefs work together with the chief in stool matters. However, if a chief fails to perform his duties satisfactorily, the sub-chiefs are authorized to destool him. A most important role is that of *okyeame*. Paramount chiefs will have a number of *okyeame* as well as the sub-chiefs, and numerous other people who constitute their entourage.¹²

Because the political system is inextricably linked to the kinship system, queen mothers also serve as the embodiment of Asante identity, the mother of the clan and the link between the individual and the larger kin group (Stoeltje 1995). A very complex form of leadership replicated in every town and village, chieftaincy is without question a political system. In it authority has clear parameters but power is always under negotiation. Queen mothers and chiefs were engaged in these negotiations of power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (in pre-colonial Asante) as the record, both oral and written, shows, and though the various functions have shifted in terms of dominance, chieftaincy has remained a powerful force in the social and political life of the twenty-first century.

Contradictions, Continuities, and New Configurations

The weighty history of the Akan peoples and the Asante in particular demonstrates the complexity of power relations in this system. As T.C. McCaskie argues so persuasively, the Asante state and the social order from which it grew diverged as the state elaborated and expanded its goals; in order to maintain an equilibrium of compromise between the two, a series of articulations was forged that functioned as ideological accommodation between the state's purposes and the discrete principles, imperatives, norms and values that constituted the social order, evolved over centuries of settlement in the region (McCaskie 1995: 74-77). Close examination of the dynamics of power illustrates that queen mothers in precolonial Asante exercised considerably more power than they did during colonialism and since (Aidoo 1981; McCaskie 1995; Wilks 1975). Ignored by the British, in spite of Rattray's observation that they could be important to the stability of society and by the newly independent state of Ghana, *ahemmaa* have survived the encounter with the West, still clear about their position in society. Unlike the chiefs of small towns, who often reside in cities and in some instances show minimal interest in their communities, appearing only on occasions of public display and sometimes not at all, queen mothers take their responsibilities seriously. They are more likely than chiefs to reside in their town, though many also spend time in the cities, living with family who are linked to the hometown. Moving about frequently permits them to pursue financial affairs and to participate in circuits of information, carrying news to those who live in the city and obtaining

¹² While chieftaincy is the subject of numerous serious scholarly works as well as short descriptive ones, information on the sub-chiefs and elders is less developed than on chiefs. I am especially grateful to Nana Agyeman Serboɔ of Juaso and Kumasi for his assistance with these matters.

information about chieftaincy affairs in general and politics at all levels. Increasingly, queen mothers must take the initiative to move about and pursue these activities in order to sustain themselves as well as the social order in their communities. This set of circumstances creates a heavy burden for almost any queen mother. Caused by the sharp differences between chiefs and queen mothers, the consequences of differential experiences under colonialism and modernity, and the growing pressures of economic survival in postcolonial society, the burdens queen mothers bear today threaten to subvert their authority and undermine their performance. Ironically, while the present could arguably be defined as the most precarious moment of history for queen mothers, they are also at this time becoming visible to influences outside the culture as an important cultural and political resource. This situation reminds us that irony characteristically occurs where contradictions become apparent. And indeed anthropologists have recently directed our attention to irony as it operates in diverse cultural contexts. Noting its prominence in situations of political uncertainty, especially the contingencies in the experience of people constructed as marginal, they have observed it appearing in circumstances involving contradictory cultural models of authority relations (Fernandez and Huber 2001: 21-26).

Independent of the above line of discourse, McCaskie (1995) identifies and analyzes the uses of irony and paradox in the pre-colonial Asante state in which contradictory cultural models of authority were being articulated. The paradox he identifies in Asante culture is the collapsing of the centralized Asante state together with a segmentary lineage system (McCaskie 1995: 77), perceived by the early anthropologists in Asante to be perplexing, since they believed it could not happen. Recognizing the phenomenon as more than an anthropological conundrum, McCaskie explores ambiguities, anomalies, contradictions, and ironies in legal cases, in verbal expressions, in the changing status of specific families (lineages) and argues that these verbal practices "were sanctioned expressions of profound but basically unresolved contradictions in the relationship between the values embedded in the state and the social order" (McCaskie 1995: 80). This process by which contradictions exist in different systems of authority was expressed through well established speech forms in pre-colonial Asante, and these models of speech behavior afforded the Asante "a potent battery of mechanisms that were dedicated revealingly, to indirection in communication" (McCaskie 1995: 81). Rather than disappearing with colonialism, these forms of speaking have been elaborated and can be widely observed throughout Ghana as well as in the courts of chiefs and queen mothers today (Yankah 1995; Obeng 1997; 1999). It might be argued, in fact, that paradox, contradiction and irony have contributed to the vitality of the culture and made possible its unbroken continuity into the 21st century in that they have long been used to facilitate processes of adaptation and accommodation to contradiction and contingency, as well as to voice social and cultural criticism which could not safely be expressed directly. As Fernandez and Huber have stated, "...irony is often used ideologically to express and to contain complexity, wrestle with dissonance and disorder, and critique innovation and deviance" (Fernandez and Huber 2001: 30).

Yet continuity in one form does not imply the continuity of others, especially those related to female authority. In this regard female political leaders have not fared well in Africa. That the role of queen mothers has survived at all is quite remarkable compared to the fate of female leaders and women generally under colonization.¹³ Let us briefly explore, then, the continuity of the role of *Ahemmaa* in Asante who were relegated to obscurity during British occupation.

Among the strongest factors in continuity over time, affecting all of the Akan people and marking them as distinct, is their matrilineal kinship system. All women are important in this matrilineal society, but queen mothers are especially so because they serve as a sign for women generally, and they provide the links of the chain that define who are members of any royal family. Their role was built on the social order that not only preceded colonialism but preceded the Asante state, specifically

¹³For a comprehensive comparative study of women under colonization by feminists anthropologists see the volume *Women and Colonization*, eds. Etienne and Leacock; more recent volumes that consider the effects of colonization on women/gender in African societies is *Gendered Colonialisms in African History*, eds. Hunt, Liu and Quataert and *Women in African Colonial Histories*, eds. Allman, Geiger and Musisi. A thorough discussion of the effects of colonization on women and on constructs of gender in African societies is Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*.

that core element of the social order defined as the kinship system from which they derive their authority. Scholars have long pondered questions concerning the differences between matrilineal and patrilineal societies and debated their significance. Although few conclusions have been reached, a few fundamental observations can be made, as Reh and Ludwar-Ene (1995) have pointed out. Specifically, they note that women in patrilineal and patrilocal societies have to invest a great deal of their creativity in adapting themselves individually to the respective situations they are placed in through marriage, but "women in matrilineal and matrilineal societies can bring their energy potential into play beyond the familiar sphere and can contribute to the general organisation of society" (Reh and Ludwar-Ene 1995:10). In other words, women in matrilineal societies enjoy a degree of stability in their life because they do not have to give up their status and/or identity and begin anew in a strange environment when they marry. Through a variety of means women in a matrilineal society are able to participate in social and public life; of especial importance to women in Akan cultures is the presence of a queen mother in a position parallel to the chief who has as one of her most important responsibilities the welfare of women. This function ensures each woman a venue where she can take her conflicts and a female authority who will hear her story.¹⁴

A second condition affecting the survival of the institution of queen mothers in contemporary Ghana is the principle of replication. Also derived from the social order that preceded the Asante state, the political system is replicated in every clan, in every town, and at the level of the paramount chiefs and queen mothers. This replication provides specific, material institutions and individual leaders (*ahemmaa* and *ahene*) who symbolize identity as well as authority in every location. These circumstances are the result of that historical paradox, the linked institutions of a centralized state and a social order based on a lineage system. McCaskie also outlines a contradiction in the Asante state between the norms and values embodied in the social order that accorded status and recognition to lineages and respectability, and the emphasis placed on the accumulation of wealth, which overshadowed lineage status but did not erase it by the 19th century. This contradiction foreshadows the rupture with the future for the queen mothers, and the continuity with the future for so many chiefs.

In the 20th century, institutions and circumstances converged in a new configuration that elevated the male leaders of the Asante political system and linked them to their counterparts in the modern nation state, changing the functions of the sign for both *ahene* and *ahemmaa*. In this configuration two different models of authority are in place: chieftaincy and the state. Although the two systems differ dramatically, the individuals who become linked together are primarily males who have acquired status through the accumulation of wealth/education rather than by virtue of their lineage (or, in addition to their lineage). As sources of power are linked increasingly to wealth and education, resources largely unavailable to queen mothers whose status and power are determined by their lineage, the dual gender feature of the indigenous system is gradually diminished. This configuration shifts negotiations of power to predominantly male institutional settings, and cultural norms, values, and practices assume different meanings. This shifts the meaning of the signs, Chief and Queen Mother, as the dominant function of the signs changes. For the Chief the dominant function becomes his ability to operate in the modern world, particularly to obtain funds, while the Queen Mother's association with native cultural values defines her function as outmoded.

Evidence of this configuration and shift appears in many contexts, but one of the most influential is scholarly publications. Read by many of the educated elite, these publications represent a context wherein issues can be defined, developed, or ignored, especially because publications produce a fixed text which can be widely read and discussed and may subsequently shape policy. The general scholarship on chieftaincy in Africa, particularly European publications, has ignored the role of female leaders with few exceptions, but no example is more blatant than a 1999 collection of essays by European scholars which claims to assess chieftaincy in all of Africa in a "new socio-political landscape" (defined as the relationship between chiefs and the modern nation state) (van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and van Dijk 1999). The only mention of African female leaders occurs in an article on Jamaican Maroon societies who established a form of chieftaincy modeled on the Akan, including a

¹⁴ For studies of these courts and a focus on women who use them see Stoeltje (1998); Obeng and Stoeltje.

female leader. Any study of Akan chieftaincy is absent from the collection altogether. This brand of scholarship demonstrates the ease with which the male-only configuration operates to exclude female leaders from recognition and ultimately from the negotiation of power.¹⁵ It is all the more notable since one of the editors, van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, is co-editor of a volume that includes two articles on Asante which direct attention to custom, law, and queen mothers, as well as one that compares Akan and Jamaican Maroon queen mothers.¹⁶

Performance, Power Relations, and the Global Stage

Such bias as the work mentioned above exhibits has its origins in the patriarchal ideologies inherent in colonialism. Widely diffused by the educational and bureaucratic systems of colonialism,¹⁷ bias against women generally and certainly female leaders of indigenous political systems was characteristic. As Oyewumi argues, "The goal of the missionaries was to transform African societies, not preserve them" (1997: 128). In Ghana today one encounters a wide range of attitudes concerning chieftaincy generally. Regarding queen mothers, most Ghanaians, certainly the Asante, are careful to demonstrate respect for queen mothers; nevertheless, it is still possible to detect a degree of ambivalence on the part of many, both females and males. Whether they express ambivalence, amusement, disdain, neglect or outright hostility (an emotion a chief involved in a chieftaincy dispute might feel), some men and some women are clearly not persuaded of the value of queen mothers. These biases are intensified by the forces of nationalism and globalization.¹⁸ As Gwendolyn Mikell has reported from her case studies of Accra women, they understand that their "...problems derive not just from patriarchal positions taken by men, but partially from a nationalist stance taken by state leaders faced with hegemonic global demands" (Mikell 1997: 334).

Together these influences shape power relations within chieftaincy and pose a threat to the authority of queen mothers, affecting their performance. This threat has many manifestations, any one of which can be submerged, disguised, denied, or even developed into violence, which happens only rarely. To address this threat in the broadest of terms, I want to single out several major manifestations that directly affect a queen mother's authority and her performance of her role. The first and most obvious, of course, is the modern state, a site where major negotiations of power take place that generally exclude queen mothers from any consideration but do not always exclude chiefs. Built on principles of democracy in which official leaders are elected, the Ghanaian state is particularly significant because Ghana was the first African country to achieve its independence (in 1957), and its first president, Kwame Nkrumah, became an influential spokesman for independence throughout the continent. Today's elected political leaders who serve in the government represent all of the ethnic groups in Ghana and the several regions of the country. Consequently, Ghanaians exhibit a strong sense of national identity, both at home and in the diaspora.

In contrast, Asante nationalism derives from a precolonial state, transformed into an ethnic identity. It continues to function with its hierarchical political system based on lineages, complete with a legal apparatus and courts, traditional religion, and a dual gender system of leadership.¹⁹ Moreover, the King and Queen Mother of the Asante occupy their palaces on the same site as their ancestors who

¹⁵ For a select few publications that discuss female roles in African political systems see Aidoo 1981; Barber 1991; Kaplan 1997; Lebeuf 1960; Rattray 1923; Reh and Ludwar-Ene 1995; Oyewumi 1997; Sofola 1998; Stoeltje 1995; 1997; 1998; 2000.

¹⁶ See the articles by McCaskie, Stoeltje, and Zips in van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and Zips, eds. (1998).

¹⁷ See Oyewumi (1997) for an in depth discussion of how this Western bias developed.

¹⁸ See Anthias and Yuval-Davis' comprehensive work (1989) on the way that nationalism defines women.

¹⁹ Jean Allman's thorough historical study (1993) of the Asante role in the transition from colonialism to independence, specifically the Asante National Liberation Movement, integrates the concept of ethnicity with the paradigm of the nation/nationalism, yielding a brilliant study of Asante as historic nation that allows us to interpret persistent Asante national sentiment as a "manifestation of the internal dynamics of Asante society and not simply a by-product of external stimuli" (Allman 1993: 14).

established the Asante state. Recently the Asante have created an Asante Congress, and it has its own constitution. It has held two public Congresses, one of which celebrated the vision and heroism of Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen Mother who inspired the Asante to go into battle against the British. As a consequence of these political, historical and cultural configurations, queen mothers and chiefs alike live in a world of two nationalisms, Asante nationalism and Ghanaian nationalism. They move within and between the nation state, the local domains of custom, and global sites where residents of their home towns have settled and formed organizations, in a dynamic process that invokes multiple identities. Arjun Appadurai has commented on this global phenomenon as the central paradox of ethnic politics. He explains:

That is, sentiments whose greatest force is in their ability to ignite intimacy into a political sentiment and turn locality into a staging ground for identity, have become spread over vast and irregular spaces as groups move, yet stay linked to one another through sophisticated media capabilities (Appadurai 1990:15).

Other scholars, too, have noted the capacity for cultivating multiple identities and the potential contained in the process. Paula Ebron (1999: 911) has pointed out that,

At the center of cultural politics lies a question of power. Self-consciously alternative identities perhaps challenge but may also reinforce dominance; both invigorate discussions of the new antagonisms that are breaking the hyphen between nation and state.

And, indeed, the dynamics of multiple identities and multiple sites of "home" not only invigorate discussions concerning the nation and the state, but create possibilities and potentialities for negotiating power, especially for the symbols of Asante identity, chiefs and queen mothers. These dynamics are present at the local site, they extend throughout the hierarchy, they may affect the nation, and they reach out further to the global sites, carrying politics with them. However, in these various processes chiefs have gained numerous advantages over queen mothers, and the reasons for this are not a secret. One of the most powerful reasons, one that provides solidarity for chiefs and the opportunity to strengthen their bonds, is the institutional apparatus for meeting together. Chiefs meet regularly and often at two chiefly houses: the National House of Chiefs and the Regional Houses of Chiefs—sites which have bureaucrats who keep records and schedule meetings, sites at which hearings of councils are held to resolve disputes within chieftaincy, and many other matters are explored, formally and informally. Both the National House of Chiefs and the Ashanti Regional House of Chiefs are located just across the street from Manhyia, the site of the Asantehemma's and the Asantehene's palaces in Kumasi. Queen mothers do not have a parallel meeting place even though they are included in the definition of a "chief" found in the Constitution of Ghana (1992: 168). These Houses for meeting were created after Ghana gained its independence and are defined and outlined in the Ghanaian Constitution in the chapter on "Chieftaincy" (1992: 164-168). They are now permanent and powerful sites for the building of chiefly status, the resolution of certain kinds of disputes occurring within chieftaincy, and the negotiating of issues so dear to chiefs. It is also of interest to note that while these Houses are consistent with the hierarchical system of chieftaincy generally, they are also autonomous institutions.²⁰ This ambiguity has created the necessity for the negotiation of power on occasion. The government also includes a Ministry of Chieftaincy, and the Minister of that office maintains contact with the leadership of chiefs, and the government rules on certain chieftaincy matters.

Complex institutions, these Houses provide chiefs with information and contacts that facilitate their links to government leaders if they wish to utilize them. Chiefs may also be closely linked to government leaders because some individuals who occupy stools will be related to or share business ties with or will maintain other links to individuals in the government. Chiefs, then, have access to and links with the state, whereas queen mothers seldom possess those privileges, and chiefs have an institutional site for meeting together, independently of queen mothers. These institutional factors

²⁰ For a discussion of the creation of the Houses of Chiefs and the relationship between the Chiefs and Nkrumah, see Richard Rathbone, *Nkrumah and the Chiefs*.

have served to bring the chiefs closer to the modern state and simultaneously have created a separation between queen mothers and chiefs

A second major threat to the authority of queen mothers in the contemporary world is their lack of education. In a society where many have no access to education and are therefore not literate at all, education marks a strict divide, and advanced education creates an elite who exercise most of the power, a situation common to most developing countries.²¹ Discussing this problem in depth, Oyewumi explains:

Perhaps the most damaging lasting effect of the association of men with education, gainful employment, and leadership may be its psychological effect on both men and women. This is reflected both structurally and ideologically in the school systems. The notion that females are not as mentally capable as males is commonplace among some of the Western-educated...It is part of the colonial legacy (Oyewumi 1997: 135)

Ghana has long been recognized internationally for the high value it places on education; nevertheless, many women have not received an education, at all. Moreover, male leaders in Asante considered it unnecessary for a queen mother to have an education until recently, apparently because they believed she only needed an education concerning matters of custom. Consequently, many queen mothers are not literate or have very limited education, and this represents a serious obstacle for them in dealing with their chiefs, especially, as it makes it possible for chiefs to exclude them easily from stool affairs. A shift is occurring, however, as many male leaders in the chieftaincy system recognize the importance of education and have begun to seek women who are both educated and qualified by lineage to occupy the stool.

A third manifestation of power relations in chieftaincy is closely related to both of the above, and that is the threat posed by financial difficulties as the Ghanaian economy becomes increasingly compatible with the global. The powerful and unsettling effects of structural adjustment have made life difficult for much of the population (Clark 1988; Clark and Manuh 1991). For *ahemmaa* and others who are dependent on a pre-modern economic system that placed all of the stool resources in the hands of the chief, the current system is disastrous. According to custom, a queen mother should receive economic support from the stool monies which derive from stool lands and investments. But the chief has control over the stool resources, and all too often, a chief is "greedy" and refuses to divide the monies with the queen mother so that she can support her household and her entourage. Moreover, some stools do not have rich resources.²² Yet a queen mother's expenses must be met. The emphasis on performing identity in Asante requires queen mothers (like chiefs) to be present for many public events. They are required to participate in events at Manhyia at either the Asantehene's or the Asantehemmaa's palace, and at ones involving the paramount chief who is their "overlord". Sitting alongside of or dancing in honor of another queen mother, expressing her sympathy at a funeral, or her respect to a Chief, she is mindful that she is appearing as a representative of her own people. Such events require one's presence for at least a day, but sometimes several days, and one must travel with an entourage, the size depending on one's status. Moreover, a queen mother must be dressed in expensive cloth at all times. None of these responsibilities nor accoutrements can be compromised if she is to exercise the authority of her position.²³

If a queen mother is unfortunate enough to be linked to a chief who is unwilling to share the dividends, she is left in an untenable position. In some instances, her family has accumulated wealth,

²¹ See Celestin Monga (1996; 1999) for discussion of this issue.

²² Resources vary widely depending on whether the stool lands include mines or farms, and whether the stool has invested in factories, plantations, or businesses. For example, Offinso is a stool rich in cocoa farms, and in Juaben the Juabenhene has developed palm plantations and a palm oil factory and a program for improving farming for which he received an award from the United Nations.

²³ All of the queen mothers I worked with contributed to this information, and all of them are finding it difficult to locate sufficient finances, whatever their position in the larger system and their particular location. However, I am especially indebted to the Offinsohemmaa and the Juasohemmaa for their patience in explaining the responsibilities of a queen mother and the full implications of them.

and she can then rely on them for the financial support she needs, but this is seldom the case, and is unreliable at best. All too often the queen mother must then turn to other individuals who have ties to the stool and the financial capability to assist her. Rarely can a queen mother turn to a husband for assistance because they are seldom married due to the demands of the role itself. A wife is expected to serve her husband in marriage, but a queen mother does not serve; other people serve her. Moreover, a queen mother's time is devoted to the performance of her role, resolving disputes as well as attending public events and working with the chief, leaving no time for attending to the desires of a husband. One queen mother explains the challenge of these dual roles.

If you are married and you are a queen mother, and you don't take proper care, your husband will leave you. You have to go about things very, very carefully... Some queen mothers concentrate more on being a queen mother than on their husbands; then if he does not understand you, he will go in for another woman.

Yet, a woman may also leave her husband sometimes because he cannot provide her with resources, and if her chief also does not provide resources for her, she has to seek them elsewhere. The same queen mother explains:

If her husband can't take care of her, she finds someone who can. But men are very, very jealous so he may feel that you are indulging and will leave you. So you have to get someone who understands you and will help you as Queen Mother. That is why most Queen Mothers don't have husbands. It is a big problem.

This convergence of authority, economics, sexuality, marriage, and power represent an instance of what Achille Mbembe has described when he states that "sex and gender norms have historically been central to the structure of power relations and to the organization of cultural categories in Africa." (Mbembe 2001: 7). The fact that a queen mother is not required to be married, is expected to have children, and is permitted to have male friends, places her in a position of privilege in comparison to other women who are expected to marry and restrict their interest to their husbands, who are permitted to have numerous wives and/or girlfriends. Yet, because of the various threats described above, a queen mother may be trapped in a difficult situation. She may be married, and the husband's demands may compromise her ability to carry out her responsibilities, or he may have no resources to contribute to her cause. In another situation perhaps a queen mother is not married, but she may not have sufficient resources from the stool monies, in which case she must seek funds elsewhere. Any of a number of circumstances involving these elements has the potential to compromise her authority, and, at best, they require her to focus on troublesome matters that compete with her duties and responsibilities.

Derived from the disparities that have developed between queen mothers and chiefs, the effect of these socioeconomic and political manifestations of transformations in Ghanaian society has been to elevate the role of the chief and to diminish that of the queen mothers, altering the balance of power inherent in their parallel roles of authority. Throughout these major shifts in the political landscape, however, queen mothers have continued to shoulder their responsibilities and, quite often, those of the chief as well.²⁴ Consequently, queen mothers have gradually become visible outside of local affairs. Both within Ghana and internationally, queen mothers have begun to attract attention from political organizations and NGOs. Due in large part to the UN Decade for Women, African women appeared on the global stage as serious subjects in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Professor Florence Dolphyne formerly of the University of Ghana and some time Chairman of the Ghana National Council on Women and Development published an informative short book, *The Emancipation of Women: an African Perspective* in 1991, the result of her participation in the international conferences on women, her travels throughout sub-Saharan Africa to meet with female leaders and women's organizations, and her Chairmanship of the National Council on Women and Development. She discusses a number of issues relevant to social conditions affecting women and the role of government, NGOs and other

²⁴ In the past several decades, chieftaincy disputes or urban dwelling chiefs have left the chief's stool in many locations vacant or ill attended, and in almost all such instances the queen mother assumes the major role of leadership, in conjunction with the elders of her family.

organizations in achieving improved conditions for women. In her Preface she explains the significance of these efforts.

Ever since International Women's Year in 1975 highlighted the issue of the equality of men and women, women's issues, which previously were the concerns of voluntary women's societies, have attained national and international significance. During that year and throughout the ten years of the United Nations Decade for Women that followed, there were numerous research studies into the condition of women in different societies...it became more and more obvious that, in order to achieve the objectives of the Decade, namely, Equality, Development and Peace, women, from developing as well as the industrialized countries, have to work together to fight the injustices that society has subjected them to for centuries (Dolphyne 1991: ix).

More recently, in 2000, Professor Dolphyne edited a volume that focuses on women achievers in the Ashanti Region of Ghana that recognizes queen mothers. Entitled *Ten Women Achievers from the Ashanti Region of Ghana*, it includes the life stories of the ten women. One of the ten is a royal queen mother, Nana Boatema-Afrakoma II, Queen Mother of Juansa, and the other is Nana Abenaa Serwaa, the queen of the yam sellers and the overall queen of all the sector queens in the Kumasi metropolitan market system, a familiar figure in all of Kumasi.

Possibly the most controversial acknowledgement of queen mothers, however, arose in Ghana in the early nineties. A queen mothers' association was established under the direction of Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings, the wife of former President Jerry Rawlings, in 1990. Mrs. Rawlings had previously established a government sponsored organization for all Ghanaian women known as the 31st December Women's Movement (named for the revolution in which J.J. Rawlings took over the government on December 31, 1981). Acting as its president, Mrs. Rawlings directed attention to the importance of queen mothers as local leaders, and developed a plan for involving them in the agenda of the 31st December Women's Movement. The plan began with the creation of queen mothers' associations throughout the political districts and regions of Ghana. Invited by the Queen Mother of Juaso to accompany her to the first meeting of this association in the Juaso District of Ashanti-Akyim (in June of 1990), I was privileged to be present for the introduction and explanation of the plan to organize the *ahemmaa*. The District Secretary, the representative of the PNDC government (the Provisional National Defense Council), presided over the meeting so that he could provide the instructions and the rationale. He explained that the 31st December movement was not well organized to achieve its goals without queen mothers so they wanted to organize the queen mothers to carry out their projects in the villages and to urge the queen mothers to be patrons of the 31st December organization. Members of the 31st December movement were present in equal numbers to the *ahemmaa* for the meeting. The District Secretary instructed the queen mothers to the effect that the purpose of the meeting was to get them to organize the women in their village to work for the youth and the improvement of the village.

A similar point of view was expressed in an interview I conducted with an organizer of the 31st December movement in Kumasi. She explained that queen mothers are important because the government had declared that development is community based, and queen mothers should help with development in their areas and that it is incumbent on the 31st December movement to educate them to know their rights and to get them to team up with their chiefs to develop their communities to benefit the people. Moreover, she continued, saying that the December 31st movement planned to organize the queen mothers and develop regional and national associations so that they would have organizations like the chiefs, and that the 31st December movement would assist queen mothers with the resolution of their conflicts with chiefs. At another meeting of queen mothers in Ejisu in the Juaben district (in June of 1990) the queen mothers were told that they had been brought together to discuss the problems facing them as women and the issues pertaining to their villages. Moreover, they were told that the 31st December movement in each town was under the care of the queen mothers and that they were seen as an integral part of the 31st December Women's Movement.

This move on the part of the 31st December Women's Movement was perceived by many Asante people as an attempt by the government to control the queen mothers for political purposes. This view was articulated vehemently in a front page article in *The Pioneer*, the independent Kumasi newspaper

on June 24, 1991.

There is nothing wrong with Asante Queen Mothers forming an association to co-operate with the 31st December Women's Movement, but there is everything wrong about the Asante Queen Mother Association UNDER THE UMBRELLA of the 31st December Women's Movement!... Are our *ahemaa* now the subordinates of a political organization...Is the whole deal a trap by the PNDC to angle the Mothers par-excellence of Asante into its political fold and thereby control them?...This is a serious incursion and a dangerous one at that, by the PNDC government into a primary indigenous political institution in the country—Chieftaincy.

A second effort on the part of Mrs. Rawlings as President of the 31st December Women's Movement in 1991 was a proposal to the effect that the National House of Chiefs should give queen mothers representation in the House. Although the issue was widely discussed throughout the country and heatedly debated in the Consultative Assembly, the amendments that would admit them failed to pass in February of 1992. Although some considered the proposal a women's issue, others interpreted it as a move by the government to gain access to the National House of Chiefs through the queen mothers and the 31st December Movement.

In the late nineties Ghana saw dramatic changes and these particular controversies have become a matter of history. A national election brought in a new party to the government with different policies and personnel. A lso significant was the enstoolment of the Asantehene, Osei Tutu II, in Kumasi. Accompanying these changes is an increase in communication (more newspapers and radio stations), and more NGOs have moved into Ghana. However, these debates served to place queen mothers in the spotlight, identifying their authority and recognizing their potential for social and political influence. The focus drew attention to their position as local leaders who can influence the course of events in their towns and villages. NGOs and other organizations have targeted queen mothers as potential leaders in their projects. For example, the *Daily Graphic*, one of the major newspapers in Ghana, reported on January 31, 2002, that Manya Krobo queen mothers (near Accra) were uniting against AIDS, and February 20 it reported that queen mothers attended a workshop on the subject. The newspaper also publishes an article directing attention to problems concerning chieftaincy, entitled "The Plight of the Chieftaincy Institution in Ghana" (January 8, 2002), and in an article that appeared on Dec. 18, 2001 chiefs are urged to redeem their image. These examples suggest the differences developing within chieftaincy between queen mothers and chiefs, as the new configuration takes shape.

In spite of their exclusion from the House of Chiefs and the refusal of many chiefs to share their resources, queen mothers seem to have been identified as effective local leaders. They have come to the attention of international agencies and NGOs and are being targeted by these global forces as leaders. For example, the Queen Mother of Juaso who invited me to accompany her to the queen mothers' association meeting with the 31st December Women's Movement in 1990 is now the president of a Catholic Queen Mothers' Association, a new organization, and she has recently become a Catholic for the first time. She proudly explained this news to me when she came to visit me in 2000, her first visit to the U.S.

These ironies that have emerged amid the uncertainties faced by queen mothers have resonance with the comments of Keith Brown (1999), who alerts us to the indeterminacy and contingency of the experience of people constructed as marginal by the expansive states. He argues that an "ironic ethnography" is attuned not only to the political context in which shifts in allegiance make sense, but also to the people's recognition of the ambiguities of their past.

The subject of a still more complex transnational story involving global exchanges is the Offinsohemmaa, the paramount Queen Mother of Offinso, mentioned at the beginning of this article, who was one of the subjects of the GEO feature story. She is an educated queen mother who has shared with me her philosophy and goals. She also told me the story of the support she has garnered from Germany for her projects. The initial contact was made by the brother of a well known son of Offinso, Bishop Peter Sarpong, a Bishop in the Catholic Church,²⁵ who invited a German doctor to

²⁵ In addition to his religious position, Bishop Peter Sarpong is an anthropologist who publishes on Asante

Offinso. When he came to visit, he was made a chief. He then invited the Offinsohemmaa to Germany where she gave talks to women's organizations interested in women and development. The German women contributed DM 5000 to her at that time. These women then traveled to Ghana so that they could see Offinso for themselves and observe the Offinsohemmaa as she carried out her duties. However, transnationalism signifies much more than travel itself, and indeed, there is more to this story that links it to the colonial past as well as the global present. They then expressed their intention to make further financial contributions to the women of the Offinso paramountcy. Not a casual contribution, however, their money will be made available as loans through the office of the Offinsohemmaa. The procedure she established requires that she meet with the queen mothers of her paramountcy to discuss the loans. She explained to me that she has to know that they will use the money profitably before she arranges the loan; then she makes small loans to the 40 queen mothers of the villages in her paramountcy. According to her, most of them will be involved in trading because farming is too risky. Since she knows them individually, she will hold each of them accountable for repaying the loans.

Obtaining funds for loans is not the Offinsohemmaa's only attempt to advance her "small" queen mothers (the Twi term for a lower rank queen mother is *ɔbaa panin*). She also holds monthly meetings for them in which they are educated in some subject. When I last visited her in the fall of 1999, she had recently invited a health nurse to come and speak to the queen mothers on AIDS and contagious diseases such as tetanus and cholera. The Offinsohemmaa observes that earlier efforts from outside agencies to address problems of drug abuse, teen-age pregnancies, family planning and other problems failed because the agencies did not involve queen mothers; now they are realizing that if they want to reach the population they should work with queen mothers. She says, "The queen mothers are in the town; they know the people here... It's me who can know the people. I am the practical one. We will do it." She is convincing because her record already demonstrates that she can achieve her goals.

The above example suggests that the native Asante political system and the cosmopolitan, postcolonial women's organization as represented by the German women, are quite compatible. This paradoxical pairing enables educated German women to support the entrepreneurship of uneducated Ghanaian women through the conduit of their female leader, the queen mother of Offinso, an educated woman who holds a position of authority defined by the precolonial political system. Further, we see in this example of the Offinsohemmaa, as well as in the experience of the Juasohemmaa, a shift occurring in the sign of Queen Mother as she receives recognition from international sources.

Conclusions

In contemporary Ghana both economic and political conditions privilege males, but women are not without voice and visibility. The central government serves as the dominant system of authority for the modern nation state of Ghana, but chieftaincy is a highly valued institution among all ethnic groups and especially for the Asante. While these observations are commonplace, they do not reflect a static situation. Relations of authority are continuously contested in one domain or another, and the negotiation of power is at the top of the agenda for anyone who holds a position of authority. Queen mothers are no exception in spite of the explanations offered by chiefs, scholars, and some queen mothers themselves that imply there are no challenges and certainly no conflicts. (It should be noted that queen mothers are more likely to explain their difficulties than are chiefs, possibly since the source of most of their problems is the chiefs).

As outlined above, the authority of Asante queen mothers has been threatened by the transformations in social and economic conditions of the twentieth century, and most especially by the gender disparities that have diminished the power of the queen mothers. As one knowledgeable

culture. Though he is a Catholic Bishop, he has no difficulty understanding the importance of a queen mother who represents the indigenous political system and traditional religion. He indicated clearly to me that she commands the respect of her people, and that he admires and respects her as well.

individual explained to me, in principle the queen mothers have more power than the chiefs, but in practice it is different. "Don't be surprised if [you find that] our society is chauvinistic." This difference between principle and practice is the source of major tensions between queen mothers and chiefs, with queen mothers advocating for principle and chiefs acting out practices that defy the principles.

If power is a scarce commodity for queen mothers, and their authority is threatened, we may well ask how it is that they are still on their stools. Bishop Sarpong addressed this issue in an interview with me in Kumasi when he acknowledged that the authority of queen mothers has been considerably reduced, but in spite of that, he stated proudly that the *Offinsohemmaa* commands respect. According to his analysis, a queen mother's authority today depends largely on her own comportment. If she is not respectful, no one respects her. Nevertheless, it is still the law that you must come if she calls you, but you don't have to follow her suggestions. Her real power depends on her individual enactment of the role. Using classical anthropological terms, *ascribed* and *acquired*, he illustrated his analysis with the two kinds of power. In pre-colonial Asante power was ascribed, and authority came from birth. Now, however, power and authority must be acquired by the individual as they perform their role.

To contextualize this shift from ascribed to acquired, a shift in the sign, Queen Mother, we must recognize that the society can select the individual to become queen mother but can no longer ensure her power and authority; it is the individual herself who must seek and acquire power, and to a great degree, her authority now depends on her power. We must also remind ourselves that queen mothers have long been marginalized and their positions denied or revised by changing systems of authority. Throughout, however, they have staunchly remained on their stools, administering to their constituencies. They have continued to embody the role of mother of the clan and to enact Asante identity while chiefs have all too often tarnished their image with chieftaincy disputes and abuses of power.

It would appear, then, in spite of contemporary threats to their authority, that queen mothers are proving to be resilient yet again. Representing the native, but comfortable with multiple systems of authority, they are establishing links to the cosmopolitan. They have not given up their efforts to destool irresponsible chiefs or to persuade their chiefs to provide resources for them, but they are simultaneously pursuing the path to external resources. Recognizing that ascribed power and authority has been weakened, they are acting as individuals and becoming traders so that they can feed their children; and they are pursuing development projects for their communities at every opportunity. At the same time they are becoming more aware of each other and the advantages of meeting together to share experience, regardless of who provides the umbrella. Making these transitions is challenging, especially so because having to search for resources in itself represents a challenge to their authority. Yet, the forces of globalization are recognizing the potential of queen mothers and through them are changing the dominant function. Rather than advisors to chiefs who are often uninterested and unavailable, their dominant function is shifting to the welfare of women. Their relationship to the chief is diminishing in importance, while their activities with external sources that can benefit the women for whom they are responsible is increasing in importance. What was previously a negative cultural value that associated the sign, Queen Mother, with the past, has now become a positive value, creating hope for the future.

Assuming their full responsibility as mother of the clan, *ahemmaa* are fully conscious that they signify Asante identity and continuity. African identity, according to Mbembe, is a process of composition and stylization through which disparate signs and fragments of reality are rearranged around central signifiers that function as images and illusions (Mbembe 2001: 11). But, identity is nothing if it is not performed. The performance of identity has long provided the space for the negotiation of power and the renewal of authority, the expression of gender relations and the construction of images (Stoeltje 1997). This is the space in which composition and stylization take place. Queen mothers, undaunted by uncertainty and indeterminacy, are propelled by the principle of continuity into the performance of identity, where they are fully engaged in the process of composition and the enactment of paradox as they approach the global stage, signifiers of female authority and the embodiment of a shifting sign.

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